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ABSTRACT

School and home communication is of increasing interest in an era of concern for educational accountability. A review of research shows that landmark studies of the 1960s concentrated on the educational needs of the disadvantaged child and the influence of the home on school achievement. The current trend is toward attempting to unite the strengths of parents, child, and school in a common effort. Some illustrations of this trend are the holistic approach as exemplified by the PUSH program of Jessie Jackson and the Dade Partners program in Dade County, Florida. Some approaches directly related to skill development and enriched environment for reading are being carried out by the Dallas (Texas) Independent School District, the Chattanooga (Tennessee) Public Schools, and the Hurst-Euless-Bedford (Texas) Independent School District Reading Is Fundamental Programs. A survey of 254 parents of students from grades one to nine in the north Texas area showed that while parents got information from (in order) report cards, telephone calls, notes from the teacher, parent-teacher conferences, and school open house, they rated the effectiveness of communication in the order of: parent-teacher conferences, open house, and report cards and teacher notes. (TJ)

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Emerging Trends in Parent-School Communication

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Communication between parents and educators is not a new idea. In pioneer times, the responsibility for the education of the children rested with the parents. Later, as groups of parents banded together to search for a teacher for their community, the chosen person often lived in the homes of the students. Therefore, school and home communication was a very natural outgrowth of the circumstances. During the fifties, education went through a period of hands-off; however, it is now apparent, in the era of accountability, that the school must again open the communication process.

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The purpose of this paper is first to review the research of the environment as it supports the need of parent-school interaction. Second, an attempt will be made to summarize current trends in parent-school communication specifically related to reading by citing several exemplary programs. Finally, a report will be made on the findings of a parent survey used to assess parent evaluation of home-school communications and parent preferences in such communication.

Review of Research

Landmark research of the 60's, including studies by Bloom (1964), Coleman (1966), and Deutsch (1967), concentrated on the educational needs of the disadvantaged child. Findings emphasized the crucial importance of the development of the child between birth and six and the influence of the home on school achievement. Bloom suggested that one half of a child's intellectual development occurs between conception and age four. Other research (Bernstein, 1960; Deutsch, 1963; Ausubel, 1963) indicated that self-concept and language development were established early in the pre-school years. Findings of these studies prompted the Head Start Project and numerous other early intervention programs throughout the nation. These programs attempted to remove the child from the home environment early enough to affect intellectual, language, and self-concept development. At the same time, parents received information and training in child-rearing practices and basic health care.

Jencks (1972) and Coleman (1966), in their research with socio-economic factors and equality of education, continued to support the theory of the importance of home influences on school achievement. These reports suggested that the strength of home environmental factors were so overpowering that there was little the school could do to equalize education without changing

the community's cultural and economic status.

Although it was comforting for schools to think that there was little they could do to improve achievement, it was also unrealistic. Mass media and extended education of parents brought achievement failures to the attention of the community and accountablity became the issue. Schaefer (1971) points out that a major goal of education needs to be the strengthening and supporting, rather than replacing, the family in terms of education. Current research emphasizes a new perspective of education in which the teacher's role is expanded to that of a resource person who encourages the child and his family to take an active role in the learning process. Brofenbrenner (1974), in his longitudinal ~~of~~ study of the early intervention programs of the 60's, found that the most long-lasting gains were made by children whose parents were actively involved.

Current Trends

Although the early intervention programs were well-meaning and were founded in research, they did not produce the significant long-lasting results that were anticipated. Early intervention programs now have given way to family-centered education. Rather than trying to remediate the deficiencies in the environment, the current trend is toward attempting to unite the strengths of parents, child and school in a common effort. The 1971 Gallop Poll revealed the willingness of parents to share the responsibility for their child's education. The change to family-centered education requires training of both educators and parents (Gordon, 1976) and involves effective and accurate communication.

The importance of the family, as identified by the research of the last two decades, is evidenced by current trends in helping parents play an active role in their child's education. Numerous methods such as newsletters,

parent-teacher conferences, home visits, phone calls, orientation meetings, workshops and neighborhood discussion groups have become the vehicles for communication with, and the involvement of, parents in the learning process (Filipczak, Lordeman & Friedman, 1977).

The importance of parent involvement has obvious support nationwide as evidenced by the number of programs currently in existence. (Although Title I has mandated parent involvement, this paper will address those programs initiated voluntarily.) What to communicate to parents, how to communicate with them and the extent to which they should be involved in education appear to have taken many different configurations. Parents programs range from simple newsletters, to parent training in the teaching of skills, to incorporating parents in actual school programs. The current trend, regardless of the approach, presents the parents as a key influence in school achievement.

The diversity of the programs suggests two broad trends: the holistic approach as exemplified by the programs of Jessie Jackson and Dade County, Florida; and approaches related directly to reading as exemplified by the programs of Dallas, Chattanooga and the Reading Is Fundamental Program (RIF) as developed in Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District. (Texas).

Jesse Jackson's PUSH

Jessie Jackson's (Rasberry, 1976) crusade for pride and achievement has been extended into the educational system and views success in the school setting as a direct key to the overall goals of the program. Specifically relating to parent participation in learning, Jackson states that no matter how dedicated or expert the educator, children cannot be educated without the cooperation of parents. The Jackson program, which he calls PUSH, asks parents to sign pledges to enforce a minimum study period of two hours every

school night without interruptions from a record player, television or telephone. Parents agree to pick up report cards personally and to make appointments with teachers and counselors to discuss their children's progress. The PUSH program is supported by soliciting funds, volunteers and media coverage in the community. Jackson, himself, carries out the program by traveling nationwide to speak with parents and students currently involved with the schools. The success of the program has been in the acceptance and support by districts, students and schools throughout the nation.

Dade Partners

Just as Jackson places emphasis on the specific cooperation of each family in the community, the Dade Partners program in Dade County, Florida, is a plan designed to improve the overall quality of life in the community. Schools, businesses and parents work cooperatively to enhance the opportunities for success of students (Fernandez, 1978). Since Dade Partners is based on the belief that the community and the school system cannot survive without each other, lines of communication have been established between the two. As a result, a multitude of programs is available for the shared involvement of home, community and school. Because the Miami area is a multi-cultural community, emphasis has been placed on relating the various cultures to each other in order to improve communication. The range of programs includes school outreach for students with special problems; a volunteer program involving over 10,000 adults; Turnabout, a peer tutoring program; and an after school program of supervised recreation and developmental activities. These programs are funded by local taxes as well as by private enterprises.

DISD Partners in Learning

Parent involvement programs directed specifically to reading achieve-

ment, appear to fall into two categories: skill development and enrichment of the home environment. An example of the skills approach is the program initiated in 1976 by Alvin Granowsky (Granowsky, Middleton and Munford 1979) for the Dallas Independent School District. This comprehensive plan involves parents in their children's reading progress. The program is based on the premise that parents need specific communication concerning the school's educational prescription for their child, the student's strengths and weaknesses, and information and procedures about what they can do to help. The plan, Partners in Reading (later extended to Partners in Learning), is centered around two specific and focused parent-teacher conferences per year. A progress form of essential basic reading skills is used to let parents know exactly which skills their child has mastered and which skills require more attention. Parents also are given a book of activities keyed to the skills to help them work with their children at home. "Fuzzy Grams" serve as communication between conferences to let parents know when skills are mastered.

Parents who attend both fall and spring conferences are asked to evaluate anonymously the Partners program. Results from the 1978-79 school year showed that 97% of the parents had positive feelings about the program; 83% felt they understood how to use the activity books; 99% of the participating parents stated that they felt the teacher wanted to share information and welcomed parent involvement.

The successful attendance (70% of all parents attend conferences) by parents is attributed in part to the support by the local Chamber of Commerce, and the radio and television media. Local businesses are requested to grant released time to employees who want to go to conferences during the work day.

Plans are in progress to expand the Dallas program to include, in addition to the skills-oriented approach, a different kind of participation of parents. RAH (Reading at Home) is a planned venture of cooperation by family, school and the public library.

Chattanooga

While the Dallas program communicates primarily through parent conferences, a very similar program developed by the Chattanooga Public Schools, employs parent workshops as the major means of communication. The Chattanooga program instructs parents about their role in the total educational process by providing materials and a monthly newspaper. Parent-teacher conferences are also an important aspect of the program.

The Parent/Child Activity Cards and supportive materials used in the Chattanooga Public Schools have been designed to strengthen the bond between the home and school by seeking the assistance of parents in meeting the educational objectives in the core subject areas, specifically, readiness (preschool-kindergarten), reading, and mathematics. These materials support and reinforce the objectives of the local curriculum and are common to the educational objectives of all curriculums.

Through the Parent/Child Activity Cards, parents are made aware of what the child is learning in school, receive an explanation of how to do the activity and how the activity benefits the child. Parents are encouraged to do something with the child rather than to the child. The activities are intended to be easy, require few materials and little time. This program involves parents in the total educational process of their children by encouraging parents to work with their children in the home and within the schools on activities designed to reinforce educational objectives (Sias, 1978).

HEB's RIF Program

The second type of parent involvement program directed specifically to reading achievement is the home enrichment model. As suggested by White (1973) parents often need instruction in how to provide an enriched environment that will promote reading readiness and/or success in reading. An example of this type of approach is the RIF summer program for kindergarten students in Hurst-Euless-Bedford, Texas. The program was conducted along the guidelines mandated by Reading Is Fundamental. Each child who attended a distribution received a book; however, for every five books the child and his parents read together, the student received an additional book. Meetings were held with the parents in all sixteen elementary schools in the spring of 1979. Specific instructions on how to read a book with a child were given to parents attending. Language development activities also were demonstrated and distributed. During the summer, kindergarten teachers returned voluntarily to their classrooms once a month for a session with these students. At this time, books were shared, parents were given lists of books to read and the children heard stories read by community "celebrity" (a Dallas Cowboy, a Texas Ranger, a pilot, a policeman, etc.) These guests stressed the importance of reading in their own lives. Out of 803 kindergarten students, 500 participated in this program. Four thousand books were distributed which represented 20,000 books that the students and their parents shared together. When the children who participated in the program began first grade, they were significantly more ready for formal reading instruction than those who did not attend.

Parent Survey

In order to verify that existing communication programs and processes are perceived by parents as shared dialogue, a survey questionnaire listing

the various techniques identified previously in this paper was developed by the authors. The instrument employed a checklist in the following areas: (1) sources of information concerning reading progress; (2) types of communication directly experienced by parents in relation to reading progress; (3) means of communication deemed most effective; (4) the method most preferred; and (5) the problems with communication (by rank order and an open-ended response question).

The 254 participants of this survey consisted of parents of students from grades one through nine selected randomly from students identified as being placed in a low reading group in eight public schools or attending a reading clinic in the north Texas area. Surveys either were mailed or handed to participants during a four-week period beginning in September of the 1979-80 school year.

Of the 254 survey instruments distributed, 197 were returned for a total response of 78%. Examination of the data revealed that 98% of those responding had received general information about reading from classroom teachers. P. T. A. meetings were cited as a general source of reading information by 50% of the respondents. Newsletters, workshops and the media were cited by fewer than 10%. When questioned about specific types of communication which had actually been experienced, in addition to the 99% of the parents indicating that they had received communication through report cards, 92% had received calls from the school. Eighty-two percent received notes from the teacher. Eighty-one percent had participated in parent-teacher conferences and 61% reported gaining information relating to reading progress by attending open house at the school.

When asked to rank the effectiveness of communication they had experienced, respondents ranked conferences as the most effective. Open

house was ranked second while report cards and notes from teachers were rated third. Moreover, when asked to indicate a preferred means of communication, regardless of their personal experiences, a majority of the respondents chose the parent-teacher conferences. In addition, participants indicated that they would like to receive more "good news" as communication of reading progress. Respondents also indicated that parent-teacher-student conferences as well as home visits would be beneficial.

Time was noted as the major stumbling block in parent-school communications. Specifically, participants reported difficulties because of conflicting hours of school and work. Too, the time lapse between conferences was too great and often reports of a deficiency came too late to be remedied. In addition, participants reported difficulty in interpreting comments by the teacher concerning reading progress and the reading curriculum. Finally, some respondents cited apathy of the teacher or school as a contributing factor in poor communication.

In summary, parent-teacher conferences were identified as the most effective means of communication. However, conferences were fourth in the list of actually experienced communications. Further, while phone calls were ranked second in the list of experienced communications they were not listed as being beneficial. Parents appear to want more specific information more frequently. Finally, participants indicated a reliance on the teacher to communicate information concerning reading instruction and specific progress in reading achievement.

Conclusions

While it seems clear that communication between school and home is taking place, several questions still remain unanswered. How do schools

establish rapport with the parents who do not respond to conferences, notes, calls, etc.? Often these are the same parents that most need to have the communication lines open. Also, there seems to have been little attempt made to evaluate the quality of the existing communications. Is there any evidence to show that parents follow through with suggestions made by teachers? Too, are the schools listening to parents or merely talking to them? Effective communication must be a two-way conversation.

Since there are several methods of establishing parent involvement projects, is there a way to discern which kinds of parents would respond positively to which approach? In this era of accountability, communication between home and school is of paramount importance and warrants systematic investigation. A start seems to have been made in establishing thse parameters but much still needs to be accomplished.

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